

## Affecting Attitudes Toward the Poor Through Group Process: The Alternative Break Service Trip

*Joanne Gumpert, John W. Kraybill-Greggo*

### Abstract

The intensive group process inherent in alternative break service trips offers a unique opportunity to foster transformative learning in undergraduate students. This exploratory study focuses on a two-year project in which graduate students who were professionally educated in group work led undergraduate students in national and international service trips focused on working with the poor. Analysis of triangulated data suggests a significant change in attitudes toward the poor during the service trip. This shift appears to be facilitated through the group process guided by the graduate student group leaders. Specific strategies that promote group development and reflective group interaction are identified. Areas for additional study are suggested.

### Introduction

The alternative break service trip provided by many institutions of higher education offers a unique opportunity to help students examine their perceptions of the poor and expand their understanding of poverty. With the intense, continuous exposure to poverty twenty-four hours a day for five to ten consecutive days, ongoing interaction with the poor, and reflective dialogue with peers, students experience an emotional "high" and frequently return to campus describing these service trips as "life changing." The intensive group experience of these trips is unique to this type of service-learning and can either enhance or detract from the students' individual growth through the beginning transformative process. A professionally skilled group leader with a conceptual understanding of group development and normative group dynamics could shape the group process to strengthen the transforming impact of the service trip. This article reports on a project in which graduate social work and counseling students, as part of their professional education and under supervision in group practice, worked with six groups of undergraduate students on alternative break trips. Analyses of qualitative and quantitative data indicate a significant change in attitudes toward the poor,

that group interaction facilitated movement through stages of transcendence, and that respondents perceived participation as a group member in the service experience as an integral part of the transformation process.

## Literature Review

Numerous studies have demonstrated the positive effect of service-learning on personal development, civic responsibility, interpersonal skills, tolerance and stereotyping, learning, moral development, and greater understanding of social problems (*Austin and Sax 1998, 262; Batchelder and Root 1994, 354; Boss 1994, 191–96; Eyler and Giles 1999, 24; Eyler, Giles, and Braxton 1997, 13–14; Gorman, Duffy, and Hefferman 1994, 429; Gray et al. 2000, 38–39; Greene and Diehm 1995, 59–61; Hudson 1996, 91; Mabry 1990, 41–44; Marullo and Edwards 2000, 746–48; Myers-Lipton 1998, 256–57; Parker-Gwin and Mabry 1998, 284–89; Smith 1994, 42; Trozzolo and Brandenberger 2001, 4; Zlotkowski 2001, 29*). In their extensive study of the learning in service-learning, Eyler and Giles (1999, 25) report specific effects related to changing perspectives and understanding of poverty (43–44). Service-learning students develop (1) a more positive view of the people they work with; (2) a sense that the people they work with are “like me” and a growing appreciation for other cultures (31); (3) growing tolerance (31–32); (4) a new perspective on social issues (135–36); (5) new perceptions of the locus of social problems and a belief in the importance of social justice, the need to change public policy, and the need to influence the political structure personally (138); and (6) gains in each element of a citizenship model consisting of values, knowledge, skills, efficacy, and commitment (159–61).

Although there is extensive evidence of the positive impacts of service-learning on undergraduate students, little study has been undertaken focused on the process of learning through exposure, participation, and reflection (Eyler 2000, 11–13). By its nature as a group experience, the alternative break trip appears to offer a unique opportunity to use the group process among the student participants as a means for initiating a transformation process through reflective dialogue with peers. Transformation theory identifies a mode of “meaning making” by becoming critically aware of one’s own tacit assumptions and expectations and those of others, and assessing their relevance for interpreting experiences. In other words, this mode of learning is the process by which participants transform their “taken for granted” frames

of reference to make them more inclusive, discerning, open to change, and reflective (Mezirow 2000, 7–8).

Transformative learning involves participation in constructive discourse among peers to use others' experience and one's own to assess reasons for justifying one's assumptions and making action decisions based on the resulting insight. Group members can engage in this open process only if they share a sense of trust, solidarity, security, and empathy with each other. The interactive group process consists of finding agreement, welcoming difference, trying on other points of view, identifying the common in the contradictory, tolerating the anxiety implicated in paradox, searching for synthesis, and reframing (Mezirow 2000, 10–16). The group process that ensues through living, working, and talking together for several consecutive days of continuous exposure, participation, and reflection on an alternative break service trip appears to provide the process through which transformative learning could be fostered by a professionally skilled group facilitator. Youniss and Yates (1997, 142–43) point out that performing service as part of an identifiable group can strengthen the commitment of the individual members.

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In their study of high school students, Yates and Youniss (1996, 273–75) suggest that service stimulates the process of identity development for youth and young adults as they move through stages of transcendence. Using the developmental theory of Erik Erikson as a basis, these authors suggest that the service experience facilitates development of a sociohistorical component of identity which helps the young adult identify values that have transcendence beyond the family and self. Yates and Youniss list three stages of transcendence.

- Stage 1—Students see “other” as a person rather than as a stereotype, or they view the “other” as an ordinary person who could be anyone.
- Stage 2—Students confront consciousness of everyday life or compare their fortune to the lot of “others.”
- Stage 3—Students reflect on justice and responsibility or theorize about changing social problems, society, or political processes (280).

Although Yates and Youniss identified these stages through analysis of students' individual journals, it seems logical that these stages could be identified in the content of students' group discussion prior to, during, and after alternative break trips. The exploration which is part of the transformative learning process would include statements that reflect the stages of transcendence.

### Study Design

Three graduate students in the school of social work of one institution or the human service counseling program of the other were selected each of two years (1999–2000, 2000–2001) to work with groups of undergraduate students going on alternative winter break service trips during the holiday recess. These graduate students had either completed a course on group practice or were concurrently enrolled in such a course. The content of both courses provided an in-depth conceptual understanding of small group dynamics and focused professional intervention on facilitating a group characterized by trust, cohesion, open interaction, and mutual aid and that welcomed difference and identified commonality (*Papell and Rothman 1966, 7–12; Garvin 1997, 99–131*). This approach to practice appeared consistent with the expectations of the group process described in transformation theory. The work with these groups was completed as a second-year field placement for the graduate students and as such was closely supervised by an experienced professional social worker.

Each group consisted of students from both schools, females and males, predominantly second-, third-, and fourth-year undergraduate students. Some had previously been involved in either service-learning connected to classroom courses or service trip experiences; some had not. The actual service trips, which ranged from seven days to two weeks, were to service sites in inner cities, areas of rural poverty, developing countries, or Native American reservations. At the sites, students engaged in a variety of activities working with the poor, such as assisting in classrooms, renovating homes, clearing fields, and picking coffee beans. They often worked side by side with the residents of the area.

Because of their basis in conceptual understanding of small group process, these service trips differed from the usual group-oriented alternative service trip in several ways.

- The graduate students engaged in outreach in both universities to solicit undergraduate student applications for the trips and

interviewed all applicants. Members were selected and the group experience structured based on an understanding of characteristics that would facilitate a balance between group cohesion and group vitality: group size, descriptive and behavioral attributes of individual members, frequency and length of group meetings prior to the trip, and location and resources needed for meetings (*Bertcher and Maple 1985, 180–83*).

- In order to stimulate and facilitate group development, graduate students met with their groups for approximately one and a half hours once a week for ten weeks prior to the trip.

The content of these meetings consisted of some mutual planning and implementing of fund-raising strategies to help cover trip costs and student preparation for the trips. Based on the experience of the first project year, which lacked sufficient exposure to underlying philosophy and values of service and concrete information about the populations that the students would be serving, the second project year meetings included four speakers

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specifically addressing these areas. During this time, early stages of group development were traversed, group roles emerged, and cohesion strengthened. The graduate students fostered group norms of mutual aid, caring among members, and open communication with respect for differences.

- While on the trips graduate group leaders worked alongside the students and met daily with them as a group in a private place separated from others at the service site. During these meetings students discussed their experiences of the day and the impressions, reactions, and understanding of the people they were serving and the conditions they were living in. Students’ “gut reactions” were surfaced and explored. A variety of beliefs and myths about the populations were examined and compared with the students’ day-to-day experiences. Students pondered and speculated on the underlying reasons for the poverty they were seeing. The group process helped participants come to their own understanding about these people and how they lived rather than simply accept the viewpoints and beliefs of the many adults in their lives.

- The graduate students also met with the group once or twice after returning to school to evaluate and bring closure to this emotionally charged group experience.
- A consistent focus of each graduate student was facilitating an interaction process among group members that fostered group development, cohesion, and open discussion of commonalities and differences. The graduate student engaged with the group in a manner that promoted the emergence of indigenous leadership from within the group and recognized conflict as a normative process in group development, the successful resolution of which promotes growth and fosters autonomous group decision making. While emotionally connected with the group members, the graduate student's developing self-awareness focused attention on meeting the needs of the group, rather than her or his own needs, throughout the experience.

## Methodology

This study was viewed as an initial exploration and utilized triangulated data collection. Year one served as a pilot project that determined specific changes in year two. In both years of the project a pretest/posttest approach was utilized to measure change in attitudes among project participants. Given that project participants in both years were exposed to experiences of insular poverty within diverse geographic and cultural settings, the authors employed an instrument measuring shifts in attitudes regarding poverty and the poor. The questionnaire was administered to the members of each group before the beginning of the first group meeting and following the last meeting, a week or two after returning from the service trip. The instrument, Measuring Attitudes toward Poverty Scale (*Atherton et al. 1993*, 28), is a thirty-seven-item questionnaire consisting of "common statements" made about poverty and the poor. Respondents were asked for reactions ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" on a seven-point scale. The developers of the instrument conducted preliminary reliability and validity testing with a sample of college students.

In the first year, most group meetings prior to the trip were videotaped, and the graduate students captured meetings during the trip in written records. The authors had hoped to analyze these data, coding statements that appeared to reflect stages of transcendence. However, because the tapes were difficult to hear, the data were unusable. Based on experience from the first year, group meetings prior to and after the trip in the second year were

videotaped and meetings during the trip were captured immediately following the meeting on audiotaped process recordings by the graduate student. Group leaders viewed their own videotapes, reviewed their own process recordings, and identified all statements during group sessions that reflected attitudes toward the poor. Those statements were then coded by the researchers according to the stage of transcendence they reflected, and themes were identified.

In year two of the project a one-time focus group was facilitated with each of the three service groups after the last post-service trip group meeting and following the administration of the posttest. Standardized questions on the best, worst, most memorable, and most surprising aspects of the service trip and the perceived impact of being a group member were utilized in order to provide participants with the opportunity to share subjective meaning they ascribed to the overall service experience as well as to their group membership. Focus groups were videotaped and lasted thirty-five to forty-five minutes. The tapes were reviewed by the authors to identify themes found in the discussions.

## Findings

**Sample characteristics:** In both years of the project, participants were predominantly female (86% in year one, 83% in year two), Caucasian (96% and 93%), roughly 20 years of age (average ages 19.96 and 20.17 years), and characterized by no prior service trip experiences (61% and 55%). However, in year two the project participants were slightly older and more likely to have had previous service experiences.

**Data analysis:** Tables 2 and 3 show pre- and posttest scores for both project years. The mean was calculated based on respondents' reactions, ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree," on a seven-point scale to the thirty-seven statements in the Attitudes toward Poverty Scale (*Atherton et al. 1993*, 28). Reverse scored items in the instrument were recoded prior to calculating the mean. Scores could range from 37 to 259 for each individual respondent, with the higher the score reflecting generally more positive attitudes toward the poor. Although five of the six service trip groups over the two years had increases in posttest scores that suggested some shift in their attitudes toward the poor, there were no statistically significant changes noted within the discrete service trip groups. In year two of the project, significant change ( $p < .05$ ) was demonstrated in pre- and posttest scores for the entire cohort

**Table 1: Characteristics of Undergraduate Student Participants in Project Years One and Two (N = 57)**

	Year One (n = 28)			Year Two (n = 29)		
	N (%)	M	(SD)	N (%)	M	(SD)
All Sample	28			29		
Gender						
Female	24 (86%)			24 (83%)		
Male	4 (14%)			5 (17%)		
Age		19.96	1.22		20.17	.97
18	2 (7%)			0 (0%)		
19	9 (32%)			8 (27%)		
20	8 (29%)			11 (38%)		
21	5 (18%)			7 (24%)		
22	2 (7%)			3 (10%)		
23	1 (4%)			0 (0%)		
Race						
Caucasian	27 (96%)			27 (93%)		
Other	0			2 (7%)		
Grade Level						
Freshmen	1 (4%)			0 (0%)		
Sophomore	9 (32%)			7 (24%)		
Junior	9 (32%)			8 (28%)		
Senior	8 (29%)			14 (48%)		
Previous Service Trip Experience						
Yes	10 (36%)			13 (45%)		
No	17 (61%)			16 (55%)		
Number of Previous Service Trips		.67	1.04		1.10	2.07
No trips	17 (61%)			13 (55%)		
1	5 (18%)			6 (21%)		
2	3 (11%)			4 (14%)		
3+	0 (0%)			3 (10%)		

**Table 2: Pre- and Posttest Scores in Project Years One and Two (N = 56)**

	Year One (n = 27)		Posttest		df	t
	Pretest M	(SD)	Posttest M	(SD)		
All Sample	192.63	24.68	193.74	30.54		
Group (Year One)						
Rural	180.57	12.33	188.00	17.88	6	-1.93
Urban	179.00	24.07	166.88	32.36	8	1.07
Developing Country	208.75	21.83	215.00	18.02	11	-1.39

+p < .10, \*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001.

	Year Two (n = 29)		Posttest		df	t
	Pretest M	(SD)	Posttest M	(SD)		
All Sample	195.59	16.42	203.08	20.09		
Group (Year Two)						
Urban	196.50	15.25	210.0	20.88	8	-1.27
Local	192.00	18.18	195.25	21.63	8	-1.73
Native American Reservation	198.56	16.82	203.11	17.35	7	-1.33

+p < .10, \*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001.

**Table 3: Pre- and Posttest Scores in Project Years One and Two (N = 56)**

	Pretest		Posttest		df	t
	M	(SD)	M	(SD)		
Year One	192.63	24.68	193.74	30.54	26	-.286
Year Two	195.59	16.42	203.08	20.09	25	-2.46

+p < .10, \*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001.

of project participants. There was no significant change in pre- and posttest scores among the cohort of first-year participants.

Item analysis comparing participant responses pre- and posttest did yield significant changes in attitudes regarding poverty and the poor (table 4). Although significant, many of the changes were small. However, given that student attitudes about the poor were relatively positive prior to the experience, it is important to note that for the most part attitudes became even more positive after the experience.

In the first year, there was statistically significant change ( $p < .05$ ) from the pretest to the posttest on the following items:

- Poor people will remain poor regardless of what's done with them (increased agreement).
- Society has the responsibility to help poor people (increased disagreement).
- I would support a policy initiative that resulted in higher taxes to support social programs for the poor (increased disagreement).

Changes at the  $p < .001$  level of significance from the pre- to the posttest occurred on the following items.

- People on Welfare should be made to work for benefits (increased agreement).
- The poor have a lower intelligence (increased disagreement).

In the second year, there was statistically significant change ( $p < .05$ ) from the pre- to the posttest on the following items:

- The poor should not have a nicer car than me (increased disagreement).
- The poor have a lower intelligence (increased disagreement).
- Poor people use food stamps wisely (increased agreement).

Changes at the  $p < .001$  level of significance from the pre- to the posttest occurred on the following items.

- Welfare makes people lazy (increased disagreement).
- Welfare recipients should be able to spend their money as they choose (increased neutrality).

***Stages of transcendence:*** Statements reflecting all three stages of transcendence were found throughout the interaction process of all three groups in the second year of the project. However, over

**Table 4: Pre- and Posttest Item Analysis in Project Years One and Two (N = 56)**

	Year One (n = 27)				Year Two (n = 29)			
	Pretest M	Posttest (SD)	df	t	Pretest M	Posttest (SD)	df	t
"Poor should not have nicer car"								
	---	---	---	---	3.73	1.69	4.35	1.55
"Poor will remain poor"								
	6.30	.87	5.74	1.38	26	2.25*	---	---
"Welfare makes people lazy"								
	---	---	---	---	---	5.23	1.07	5.96
"Recipients should be able to spend as they choose"								
	---	---	---	---	---	3.42	1.33	4.23
"Society has a responsibility to the poor"								
	5.37	2.06	6.19	1.14	26	-2.20*	---	---
"Recipients should work for benefits"								
	3.52	1.40	2.70	1.07	26	3.05**	---	---
"Unemployed could find jobs if they tried"								
	---	---	---	---	---	4.48	1.16	5.04
"Most poor are dirty"								
	---	---	---	---	---	5.50	1.27	6.00
"Welfare has much fraud"								
	4.26	1.46	4.70	1.73	26	-1.89+	3.68	1.28
"Welfare is a huge part of the federal budget"								
	---	---	---	---	---	4.50	1.36	5.04
"Poor use food stamps wisely"								
	---	---	---	---	---	4.69	1.09	4.23
"Poor have lower intelligence"								
	5.07	1.66	5.52	1.67	26	-1.72**	5.50	1.36
"Poor have different values"								
	---	---	---	---	---	5.81	1.27	6.23
"Could trust poor that I employ"								
	5.70	1.38	6.22	1.12	26	-1.71+	---	---
"Would pay higher taxes to help the poor"								
	4.96	1.79	5.67	1.21	26	-2.14*	---	---
Pre-/Posttest Analysis					26	-.286		
							25	-2.46*

+p < .10, \*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001.

Note: Responses to each item ranged from 1 (strong agreement with the statement) to 7 (strong disagreement with the statement) with a 4 representing a more neutral response.

the course of the group meetings the stages predominantly reflected in statements appeared to show a gradual shift from stage 1 to stage 2 and finally to stage 3. The most striking preliminary finding from looking at these statements was the shift from a somewhat stilted, intellectualized, “politically correct” statement prior to the trip to a more spontaneous genuine expression during and following the trip.

**Focus groups:** In the second year, all three groups highlighted the impact the service experience had on their ability to understand the social problems they were exposed to, with some participants reporting that they could now more clearly see the “structural causes” of poverty; one said that the “experience helped put my life in perspective . . . which I won’t forget.” Of particular attention in synthesizing the focus groups was determining how participants felt about the group process. In all three groups, this experience was viewed as one of the more meaningful and memorable elements of the project. Participants reported that the preparatory group sessions enabled the formation of “bonds before the trip [which] created a positive group dynamic” that included “mutual respect, acceptance of differences,” and a desire to learn from one another. In another group that sentiment was expressed as well when a member related having “learned something from each person” (in the group); at this statement, all group members nodded. Another group of participants expressed surprise at how the “group bonded and came together” through adversity. All three groups shared that they experienced growing trust, cohesion, and support, which provided a forum for members to risk vulnerability while on the trip in sharing their experiences.

## Discussion and Limitations

Data from pre- and posttest scores reflected mixed changes in attitudes in the first year of the project: some suggest increased judgmentalism, and others suggest the opposite. However, in the second year, not only was there a significant change in overall pre- and posttest scores, the majority of changes in specific items suggest less judgmental attitudes. Supporting these preliminary findings, analysis of second-year group meeting interaction also reflected a gradual shift in stages of transcendence, and reports in focus groups supported new insights about poverty and the poor. Data gathered from three perspectives appear to provide preliminary support for assertions that these students experienced a change in attitudes toward the poor through this service trip.

It is important to acknowledge limitations in our exploratory study. The small sample from the two-year project and lack of a control group for comparative purposes may indicate that findings are unique to this project and cannot be generalized. At the same time, the significant changes that occurred over a relatively short period of time (fifteen weeks) suggest the potential impact of a professionally guided interactional group process on alternative break service trips. This more intensive group process on an

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alternative break trip could initiate a transformational process. Expanded investigation with use of a larger sample and control group design are necessary to more fully analyze the role of group process in the transformation of participants. It is also suggested that future investigations measure transformational processes of participants for a longer duration after the trip in order to control for the influence of emotional reactions and euphoria often experienced by par-

ticipants shortly after returning from an immersion. This would provide an opportunity to assess whether any transformation was sustained well beyond reentry.

The significance of group process reported in focus groups highlights group membership as an additional factor of this experience. This suggests the potential impact of service trip leaders who bring a professional understanding of group process, skills in facilitating group development, autonomy, and comfort in dealing with difference, conflict, exploration, and intimacy in order to stimulate and support transformation through this experience. Making decisions that protected and promoted group life during these service trips appears to have had a significant impact on the transformative learning of the project participants.

The practice methodology used in this project was developed within the social work profession, and this project may suggest a new arena for the practice of social group work (*Gumpert, Burris, and Duffy 2003, 111*). The practitioner's dual focus on individual and group as a whole and knowledgeable use of everyday activity as part of group process may be key to the successful application

of this methodology in this venue. Schools of social work have been an overlooked resource for service-learning by the colleges and universities in which they are housed. Programs that sponsor student volunteers, usually housed in student affairs, have not always connected with professional programs in academic affairs, while schools of social work have focused on using traditional field placements within social service agencies rather than considering parts of their larger institution as potential field placement sites. This project demonstrates a new way of utilizing resources within institutions of higher education and a means for the social work profession to foster its professional value base.

The findings of this study suggest areas for additional research. Outcome comparison of traditionally and professionally led service trips would shed additional light on the significance of group process. Adaptation of the use of group-focused methodology in working with students in semester- and year-long service experiences within social service agencies may open additional possibilities for study.

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## About the Authors

- Joanne Gumpert, D.S.W., has practiced and taught social work practice with groups for over forty years. Through her understanding of the value base common to professional social work and service-learning, she has pioneered the integration of these fields within Marywood University. (Email: gumpert@marywood.edu)
- John W. Kraybill-Greggo, Ph.D., L.S.W., A.C.S.W., is coordinator of the social work concentration in the Sociology Department, and coordinator of the University-wide Service-Learning Initiative Committee at East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania. Previously, he was director of the Counselor Training Center at the University of Scranton. (E-mail: jkgreggo@po-box.esu.edu)